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AMERICAN SPEECH WEEK THROUGHOUT THE NATION

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Our national speech is a subject of general interest, as is evidenced by the following occurrences of the past few years: the organization of a speech committee in 1915 by the National Council of Teachers of English; soon afterward a like procedure in the Chicago Woman's Club and, through the agency of this club, the indorsement of the American Speech movement by the National Federation of Women's Clubs; the organization of the National Association of Teachers of Speech; the requirement in New York state that high-school teachers of English have a certain amount of training in speech; the serious and frequent discussions of the American Academy of Arts and Letters with reference to "the conservation of the English language in its beauty and purity;"¹ the growing popular interest in oral advertising; the increasing number of magazine articles such as "Talking's the Thing" and "How I Increased My Income by \$10,000" (by a course in public speaking, says the author); the establishment by the government of a department for aiding the foreigner among us to use the English language. The threatening influx of foreign expressions, which reminds us of the necessity, as Dr. Brander Matthews says, of "rectifying our linguistic frontiers,"

¹ *Yale Review* (April, 1918), p. 545.

and a realization of the fact, announced recently in New York by Mr. Galsworthy, that our common tongue has become the universal language have deepened this current interest. Before our new responsibility and in view of our shortcomings in speech the natural question arises, What is to be done? Fortunately there is a method, American Speech Week, which has been tried in all parts of our country and in every case has been pronounced successful. Now we of the Speech Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English are inviting the schools throughout the nation, and all other organizations interested, to join in the observance of an American Speech Week next November 2 to 8.

The first Speech Week was observed in September, 1915, in the Eastern District High School, Brooklyn, New York; the second, in March, 1916, in the New Haven High School, Connecticut; the third in April, 1916, in the Alabama Girls' Technical Institute, Montevallo. It is quite a coincidence that these three weeks were observed without, in each instance, the leader's knowing of the existence of a similar plan elsewhere. Since 1916 almost every state in the Union has had somewhere within its borders a speech week. Ideas have multiplied and have grown so that it may not be amiss to give briefly the various plans and methods used.

Much of the success of the week depends upon the preparation. There is a growing tendency, which we teachers of English welcome, since we believe that the teaching of English is every teacher's responsibility, to have the committee in charge, representing the faculty, composed primarily of teachers from other departments than English. In some cases the students, co-operating with the faculty committee, are chosen from the Senior class; in others, from all the classes of the school—Freshman, Sophomore, etc. Often the papers of the community and of the school give preliminary announcements. Posters and slogans and the schedule are planned most definitely by the committee.

The typical program of speech week runs thus: Monday: announcements by a special issue of the school paper, by slogans, posters, tags, and perhaps a general assembly for speech purposes; Tuesday: a contest in pronunciation and enunciation at general

assembly, and demonstrations of various kinds in all classes; Wednesday: a contest in debating or oral reading or story-telling, or a program, as "Literature in Music," "Our National Heritage—Chaucer," etc; Thursday: general assembly with visiting speakers from the community or elsewhere; Friday: a play, a parade, or a pageant. Among children of the lower grades speech games are quite popular.

It is significant, I think, that in one instance the people of a community were willing to attend, with a small entrance fee required, an evening's program consisting largely of a contest in pronunciation. Demonstrations in classes followed the character of the work in each instance. In one chemistry class there was held a debate on the question, "*Resolved*, That the Text in Chemistry Be Changed from 'The Chemistry of Common Things' to 'The Chemistry of Uncommon Things.'" In a certain business English class a contest in salesmanship was held. The teacher reporting said that when the salesman was asked by one of the audience why he wished to sell his good automobile, he replied, "We had an accident, and since that time my wife has been so very nervous that our car is of no pleasure to us."

Dramatics has been a powerful factor in furthering speech betterment. As a result of the recent observance of speech week in Chicago, featured largely by the Chicago Woman's Club, there have appeared several playlets and plays which may be used to advantage. Some have been published and may be secured through Mrs. Katherine K. Robbins (Chicago Woman's Club, Fine Arts Building). The committee would recommend, however, that the writing of original playlets be encouraged as far as it is advisable. Often impromptu dramatization of speech carelessness will laugh out of countenance a deep-seated habit, as in the case of "Fixin' Mary's Hair." The speech pageant given recently by the high-school teachers of Minneapolis with the co-operation of the university professors is significant because it announces the definite assistance of college and university teachers. If I may inject a personal impression here, I would say that too frequently college instructors have considered the movement as somewhat beneath the dignity of college and university. Several instructors

have promised to help dignify the procedures so that we may enlist generally the active interest of these faculties and student bodies.

The devices for speech week are posters and placards, dodgers for distribution, pledges, slides, tags, and slogans. One needs only to see the remarkable collection of posters produced by the Chicago school children, through stimulation from the Chicago Woman's Club, to realize the possibilities of clever representations of matters pertaining to speech—slipping up on one's vowels, the wastebasket of mistakes, Uncle Sam and his melting-pot, etc. The committee is indebted to Mr. Hosic for having made sure of procuring the best results by arranging previously to speech week for a lecture on the making of posters, given before the teachers by a leading Chicago teacher of art. We hope to use this collection as a nucleus for a traveling national exhibit.

Placards, the more the better, giving slogans, quotations, etc., are placed usually on blackboards, on doors, in corridors. In one instance a large electric sign at the entrance, furnished by the local electric company, announced the slogan of the day throughout the week. The slogans ran thus: "A free country, a powerful language"; "Every seed, every animal, has its use; so has every word in the English language"; "Speak good English and your English will speak for you." The tag is used to advantage; sometimes a single tag with the pledge for the week, at another time a differently colored tag for each day bearing the slogan of the day, or again a single tag saying "Please correct my speech." In one instance dodgers asking, "Do you say," with a long list of mistakes with corrections opposite, were distributed by pages in a speech parade—an admirable method for securing definite co-operation from the people of the community.

The standard to be followed is a common subject of discussion, as was suggested recently by the ready question of a university professor, upon being told about the speech movement, "Who will set the standard?" In the *Musician*, Melba has said that singers would be greatly obliged for a standard of speech in English. It seems that according to authorities among us, such as Dr. Fred N. Scott, Dr. Brander Matthews, and Dr. George P. Krapp, there is no standard of American speech. One writer

says that our speech is too unsettled for us to consider even the possibility of having a standard, and furthermore the average American would not abide by such if we had it. There are, however, certain ends toward which we may strive. These ends are suggested by the following quotations:

Dr. Scott:

There is a kind of ungainly utterance which goes with slovenly thinking and ill-regulated feeling that offends, and properly offends, those whom Plato calls "lovers of discourse." Against this we must set our faces like iron. . . . Live nobly, think good thoughts, have right feelings, be genuine, do not scream or strain or make pretense, cultivate a harmonious soul—follow these injunctions, and you are laying the foundation of a standard of American speech.¹

Dr. Brander Matthews:

By an appeal to the public, direct and incessant, by word of mouth, and by printed page, the members of the Academy can insist on the value of our linguistic inheritance, on our possession of a language incomparably simple in its grammar and incomparably comprehensive in its vocabulary. They can remind us Americans, descended from stocks and united with the British by law and literature and language, of the preciousness of our English speech, the mother-tongue of two mighty nations, inherited by us from our grandfathers and by us to be handed down to our grandchildren unimpaired in vigor and variety, in freshness and in nobility.²

Dr. Charles Eliot:

A cultivated man should express himself by tongue or pen with some accuracy and elegance. . . . Yet we cannot but feel that the cultivated man ought to possess a considerable acquaintance with the literature of some great language, and the power to use the native language in a pure and interesting way.³

Henry James:

Our national use of vocal sound in men and women is slovenly, an absolutely inexpert daub of unapplied tone. . . . The *vox Americana* . . . is one of the stumbling-blocks of our continent . . . due to indifference to tone-standard. . . . I commend to you imitation of formed and finished utterance wherever that music steals upon your ear. The more you listen

¹ F. N. Scott, "The Standard of American Speech," *English Journal*, VI (1917), 10.

² B. Matthews, "Is the English Language Decadent?" *Yale Review*, VII, 545.

³ Charles Eliot, *The Cultivated Man*.

to it the more you will live it . . . the more you will wonder that you could ever have lived without it. What I thus urge upon you, you see, is a consciousness, an acute consciousness absolutely.¹

Dr. George P. Krapp:

One must suppose that it is the true function of speech to reveal and not to conceal personality. In short, would it not be better to think about what our American speech is than what it ought to be?²

G. H. Palmer:

What stamps a man great is not freedom from faults, but abundance of powers.³

Mr. J. F. Hosis:

Our aim is clear, correct, and pleasant speech in everyday life *for the sake of those to whom we speak*.

Mademoiselle Clement, who is representing the French government in our country, said recently before a Detroit audience that we Americans can help much toward facilitating international understanding by watching our speech with particular reference to fitting the word to the idea.

In view of the preceding quotations, may we not agree upon the following aims: tidiness of speech, precision in choice of words, power in speaking (notably pleasant and properly placed voices, clearness of statement, a consideration of the *art* of forceful speaking)?

For general purposes and methods our experience and observation would lead us to make the following suggestions. How much can we accomplish this year in this community? should guide our zeal. In the average school speech week in the first year is the only agitation for speech improvement. As the week is observed year after year, there comes into existence a speech league, with a cabinet and with active and associate members. Finally the inevitable inquiry after such agitation, Where can I find suitable instruction in speech? is answered by the establishment of strong courses in speech. Here I should state in passing

¹ Henry James, *The Question of Our Speech*.

² G. P. Krapp, "The Improvement of American Speech," *English Journal*, VII (1918), 91.

³ G. H. Palmer, *Self-Cultivation in English*.

that in many high schools over the country that have not observed speech week, such as Jamaica High School, New York; Hunter College High School, New York; Newton Technical High School, Massachusetts, exceptionally strong courses in speech training are given. The committee has in hand already much material upon this subject which later may tell another story about speech instruction.

The movement should be most elastic, the method varying to suit the community. For illustration of this necessity I would place side by side the account of the Minneapolis pageant and the following excerpts from a letter from New England:

This way of publicity and advertising with parades and pageants is extremely distasteful to us here in the old-fashioned East; it takes you hustling, energetic, advertising westerners to make good material "to show off." . . . I shall be very glad to give you any further details that I can, but please do not ask me for "pictures of groups in pageantry and parades."

We should be tolerant, as Dr. Scott has cautioned. The extremists are our enemies, the person who, as Henry James laughingly says, wears a most impudent "mug," and being urged to improve his speech proves the more riotous, and the other who is too narrow to enjoy, for instance, a certain newsboy's name for the girl reporters, "joy-busters."

The wilfully careless person is negligible, for he will follow readily public opinion. The latter type, the person who is over-busy "unsplitting the split infinitives," as Dr. Scott says, is the person who does more harm than good, who is the more dangerous because of the possibility that he or she may become a leader of the speech movement.

The movement has been created to include *all* agencies—the school, parents, business and professional men and women. The Chicago Woman's Club has done much for the movement by approaching the subject from a point of view outside of the school. The movement is primarily *social* in character. Indeed, in this respect only, aside from mere concentration, do the speech-week and the speech-league methods differ from the ordinary speech activities that many schools have had in class work before the movement was begun.

There remain yet unsolved problems regarding which the speech committee solicits aid or suggestions. We have not found the method which will reach the business world. Some of us think that if we can have speech made a conspicuous feature in courses in salesmanship we shall have a valuable wedge. Certainly the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A. courses in public speaking and the recent agitation for speech improvement at Marshall Field's store in Chicago are suggesting much in the way of method. Reaching the home for speech purposes is as yet an unsolved problem. True it is that mothers' clubs and parent-teachers associations respond readily. Yet their problem is ours—reaching the ignorant home which needs us most. The best method used so far for this purpose was that of one teacher who pledged the school children on Monday of speech week to discuss speech at the dinner table. Securing co-operation of newspapers will certainly go far toward reaching the home, since oftentimes the newspaper is the only reading material to be found in the home.

Our outlook is promising. Miss Alberta Walker, intermediate editor of the *National School Service*, which reaches 600,000 schools, promises her aid. Mr. E. D. Shurter, of the University of Texas, hopes to feature the week in the *Leaguer*, issued by the Extension Department of the University, which reaches 3,000 Texas schools. May we not have other such pledges?

Finally, should we not keep uppermost in mind the purpose as given by Mr. John M. Clapp for the *first* Speech Committee, "to raise the standard and improve the quality of our speech—that is a project to enlist the co-operation of *everybody* who prays for a better America."

[NOTE.—Since the foregoing paper was written, reports have come from Evander Childs High School, New York, and Eastern District High School, Brooklyn, each giving statements of aims which might well be incorporated in this article. Mr. J. B. Schamus, of the former school, reminds us that the aim might be "to take a student's untrammelled *volubility* and have it become a forceful and deliberately purposeful *fluency*." The bulletin of the Speech Improvement League of the latter school announces as the league's objectives in speech: (1) sincerity, (2) courtesy, and (3) cheer.]